

ETHICS AND NARRATIVE LITERATURE IN THE DAILY LIFE
OF A TRADITIONAL JAINA FAMILY
OF AGRA DURING THE NINETEEN THIRTIES.
A STUDY BASED ON MY PERSONAL CHILDHOOD REMINISCENCES

I am grateful to my kind friend Professor Colette Caillat for having accorded me this rare privilege and honour not only of attending but also of participating in the proceedings of this International Symposium of Jaina Literature. When I look around me and see this galaxy of savants and pandits of international repute, I feel somewhat diffident and would crave their indulgence if they find my paper somewhat too personal and even candid! All that I could say in my defence is that this opportunity provided me an occasion to make a backward journey to my childhood and to relive the fleeting glimpses of the social and religious atmosphere of the erstwhile days. It brought back once again to my mind the sweet and exciting tales (the very first of my life) recounted by my mother at home and by the simple and kind *kathā-vācaka-s* by the roadside, many of which I heard and reheard repeatedly during the *pravacana-s* delivered in the Digambara Jaina temple and the Śvetāmbara *sthānaka* or *paṇḍhaśālā*. To verify the authenticity of the memories of *kathā-s*, *ākhyāyikā-s*, *carita-s* and *nāṭaka-s* I had to go hurriedly through the voluminous collection of Jaina *kathās* in Hindi¹, just to see if I had not simply imagined them all!

With these words I make my obeissance to all the ācārya-s, upādhyāya-s assembled here: *ṇamo āyariyāṇaṃ, ṇamo uvajjhāyāṇaṃ!*

Today I consider myself lucky to have been born and brought up in a pious but liberal and non-sectarian Jaina family such as ours, for I owe to it all my religious culture and education. My family adhered to Digambara as well as Sthānakvāsin Śvetāmbara creeds as my mother came from a Digambara household and my father was a Sthānakvāsin

1. See for example *Jain Kathāḥ*, vols. 1-38, Udaipur, 1976, compiled by PUSHKAR MUNI from various Sanskrit and Prakrit sources, edited by Devendra Muni; also, *Dictionary of Prakrit Proper Names* (2 vols.), Ahmedabad, 1970-72, for references to early sources of the stories mentioned below.

like most of the members of his professional caste group (*lohiā*)². Thus we frequented the Digambara Jain temple as well as the *paṣṣadhaśālā* and fully participated in the various religious festivals and occasions organised by these two groups with equal fervour. My parents were very religiously minded and fully shared the Jain belief that *Samśāra* (*Bhavacakra*, cycle of births, the ephemeral world of becoming or mundane existence) with its eternal companions *Rāga*, *Dveṣa*, *Māyā* and *Lobha* is a « vale of tears » and that human *gati* (condition or birth) provides a rare opportunity for the *jīva* to attain *mokṣa* if it chooses to follow the path of the Tīrthaṅkara-s by observing the Jain precepts embodied in the jewels-trio (*samyak-jñāna*, *-darśana* and *-cāritra*) and in the five *aṇuvrata*-s (*ahiṃsā*, *satya*, *aśauca-śīla* and *parigraha-parimāṇa*). Thus my parents were not only very religiously minded but they also tried their best to observe scrupulously most of these precepts in their daily *ācāra* (conduct). But as my father was often away from home in pursuit of his business interests, it was my mother who was at the centre of all religious activities and observances at home.

Ahiṃsā paramo dharmah.

Although my mother was completely illiterate, she was well-versed in all the essentials of Jainism and knew practically all the basic Jain *sūtra*-s and *bhāvanā*-s available in a vernacular version (Hindi) by heart. *Ahiṃsā*, *dayā* and *dāna* being the basic dogmas of ethical norms, my parents tried to live up to them in their daily household activities. My mother even for her daily purificatory rituals (baths, etc.) would use the bare minimum quantity of water because she considered even the unnecessary use of natural elements to be *hiṃsā*. She would take the utmost care while cleaning the house, cooking, eating, drinking and even when speaking, not to do the least harm to any living being however minute. She had renounced taking food or water after sunset and had even taken a vow to consume only a limited number of vegetables and fruits and that too when she was hardly adolescent! How I remember the whole population of mice which infested our house and which had become so insolent that they would not only roam and jump over us during the night while we were asleep but would even try to snatch bread from our hands in broad daylight! Stray street-dogs (sometimes ill and foul smelling) had free access, free lunch, and reposed during the summer heat on our staircase, and, despite our remonstrances, mother would not even tolerate the idea of forcibly evicting them! To her they were « beggars without a begging bowl » (*bejholī ke fakīr*). To her, showing kindness to animals was the real criterion of *ahiṃsā*, and, in this connection, she would recite or narrate the

2. *Lohiā*: A sub-caste among Vaiśyas whose original profession was iron-mongering.

stories of Meghākumāra, Ariṣṭanemi, Megharatha and Pārśvanātha.

Meghākumāra in his previous birth as an elephant while fleeing for his life from a forest ablaze stopped and refused to put his foot down the moment he perceived a small rabbit under it and preferred to die rather than trample the poor little animal!

Tears would roll down her cheeks whenever she narrated before us the story of the marriage and renunciation of Ariṣṭanemi, the future Tīrthaṃkara. When Ariṣṭanemi on his way to marriage with Rajulā saw animals kept in cages and enclosures, overcome by fear and looking miserable and was told that they were awaiting slaughter to regale the guests, being full of compassion and kindness, he renounced the world then and there. This dramatic heroic deed became the theme of many paintings³ and wall frescoes which adorn the walls of many Jaina temples.

An equally well-known story is provided by Megharatha who, in order to save a pigeon, the rightful prey of an eagle, gave his own flesh to satisfy the hunger of the eagle rather than surrender the helpless refugee.

In another story a Muni⁴, who is given a soup made with poisonous gourd prefers to swallow it and die rather than throw it on the ground as it would have caused the death of innumerable insects who would have eaten it.

It is this concern for living creatures which makes Jaina ascetics opposed to the burning of fire in contradistinction to Hindu mendicants who consider it as a means of penance or keeping warm; Pārśvanātha, the twenty-third Jaina Tīrthaṃkara chided Kamatha, the Hindu yogin who was doing penance sitting near the trunk of a tree specially kindled for him, in ignorance of the existence of a serpent couple who were present therein.

Jainas consider that *hiṃsā* committed in thought is as responsible for *karmabandha* as if committed in deed. The story narrated in this connection comes from the Uttarādhyāyanasūtra [?] recounted by Mahāvīra himself. Rājarṣi Prasannacandra entrusting his kingdom to his minor son, had taken *pravrajyā* and had given himself over to the most severe austerities. One day, Saṃrāj Śreṇika asked Mahāvīra about the gati (rebirth) Prasannacandra would attain if he died at that very moment. « The seventh hell », was the reply of Mahāvīra, which completely dumbfounded him.

He could not believe his ears and enquired several times: every time the answer was different. « Prasannacandra has obtained the *kevala*

3. Already in the Śvetāmbara Siddhānta, *Uttarajjhāyā* XXII, 1-27; etc. See C. CAILLAT, *The Strasbourg Manuscript 4385*, *infra* fig. 21.

4. I. E. Dharmaruci, see *Dictionary of Prakrit Proper Names*, I, s.v. Dhammarui; W. SCHUBRING, *Nāyādhammakahāṇa*, Das sechste Anga des Jaina Siddhānta (...) (Wiesbaden, 1978), n. 16, pp. 48-9.

jñāna », the final reply of Mahāvīra, puzzled Śreṇika all the more and he requested an explanation of these different answers. Mahāvīra explained that in a moment of weakness Prasannacandra imagining his son to be in mortal danger, had rushed mentally to his help, had taken to arms and fighting and had begun to slaughter mentally the imaginary assailants of his son: if he had died at that moment, he would surely have gone to the seventh hell. But as, very soon, Prasannacandra had recovered himself and had attained the heights of *vītarāga*, he became a *kevalin*.

Well acquainted as she was with Jaina *dharmakathā*-s, my mother was also a repertoire of sayings, couplets and bhajans sung by mystic saint poets in Hindī such as Tulsīdās and Kabīr, and could combine various Indian traditions⁵. She would often recite the famous couplet of Tulsī: « *dayā dharma kā mūla hai, pāpa mūla abhimāna* »: « Just as piety and compassion constitute the very basis of dharma, in the same manner pride and vanity are at the root of all sinful action ». In connection with *ahamkāra* and *vairāgya*, she would narrate the stories from the lives of Cakravartin Bharata, of Bāhubali and of Cakravartin Sanatkumāra.

Once, Cakravartin Bharata, after he had attained the zenith of power and grandeur, went to the summit of Vṛṣabhācalaparvata to engrave his own *praśasti* on the celebrated white rock. He was astonished to find that on the rock so many epigrams had already been engraved that there remained hardly any place for him to write his own. However he was not a man to be easily disheartened: he began to erase an earlier epigram to write his own. But, in the flash of a moment, he realised the foolishness and absurdity of his act, and became *vītarāga*.

The story of his brother Bāhubali⁶ is still more striking. He was the son of Ṛṣabhadeva, the first Tīrthaṃkara and the younger brother of Cakravartin Bharata. His ambition knew no bounds and his pride was insurmountable. He tried to contest the claims of his elder brother Bharata to the title of cakravartin, but having realised its absurdity he renounced the world and became absorbed in legendary acts of asceticism. But he was still not able to get over his *ahamkāra* which had actually prevented him from approaching his father Ṛṣabhadeva for his pravrajyā because he did not want to bow before his young brothers who had taken pravrajyā much earlier. Finally, sensing that, unless Bāhubali gave up his pride, all his acts of heroic asceticism would be in vain and that he could never attain mokṣa, Ṛṣabhadeva himself sent his two daughters Āryā-s Brahmī and Sundarī to persuade him to

5. On cultural contacts and mutual influences between Jains and Hindus, see V. A. SANGAVE, *Jaina Community, A Social Survey* (Bombay, 2nd revised ed., 1980), pp. 347 ff., 349 ff.; PADMANABH S. JAINI, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, Delhi, 1979, pp. 304-6 etc.

6. Cf. *Trī Praise of Gommateshvara, Shravana Belgola*, in « Mārg », vol. 33, no. 3 (Bombay, 1981).

descend from the « elephant », symbol of pride and ego. This message opened his eyes and it did not take him long to attain mokṣa.

The third story is related to the life of the Cakravartin Saṇaṭkumāra who was so beautiful and graceful that even Indra envied him, and incessantly sang praises about him, so much so that two deva-s descended from heaven to have a look at him themselves. When they saw him, they were equally impressed; but, when their glances penetrated deep into his body, they saw the symptoms of a terrible kind of leprosy taking shape. This revelation instantly aroused vairāgya in his soul and, then and there, he renounced the world. The deva-s offered a cure; but, now, his jñāna-cakṣu was wide open, and what he sought was the cure of his soul from all karmabandha-s.

How even insignificant incidents in the daily life of a man become the *nimitta* of great renunciation is illustrated in an episode from Cakravartin Bhārata's life. Once, fully attired in his regal dress, he was looking at himself in a mirror and was greatly perturbed by the ugliness of one of his fingers without the diamond ring which usually adorned it. He began to remove all his clothes and ornaments one by one and continued to regard his body thus denuded in the mirror. A moment arrived when he was completely filled with vairāgya.

And then who can ever forget the *brahmacāri-dampati* (celibate married couple) Vijaya śreṣṭhin and his wife Vijayā, each of whom even before their marriage had taken the vow to observe *brahmacārya*; Vijaya was to observe lifelong celibacy during the *śuklapakṣa* and Vijayā during the *kṛṣṇa-pakṣa* of every month. When they came to learn about each other's vow of celibacy, they accepted their destinies with calm and grace, and they remained so firm in their conduct that they came to be universally known as the *brahmacāri-dampati*. Their accumulated merit was so enormous that once when Jinadeva śreṣṭhin desired to earn the merit of offering food at the end of the *pāraṇā* (fast) of 84000 muni-s, he was told that he would earn the equal amount of merit by simply offering food to this celibate couple!

With the notion of ahimsā, the notion of kṣamā formed an ideal pair. A very interesting story told and retold was that of Kūra Gaduka (one « measure of rice »). He was a prince who had taken pravrajyā, but he had such an uncontrollable appetite that he despaired of ever attaining mokṣa. He was told by his senior muni that if he continued to observe kṣamā (pardon), his weakness for food would be largely compensated. He was at perfect peace with himself and no amount of provocation could make him lose his self-control. One day Śāsana-devī appeared before the congregation of monks to which he belonged and, to the surprise of everyone present, the first person she greeted was none other than Kūra Gaduka. Once during the Paryūṣaṇa days, when everyone was observing the fast, tormented by hunger, he went in search of food; but, the moment he put the first morsel of food

into his mouth, he was so disgusted with his weakness that, in no time, he attained *śukla-dhyāna* and later on *mokṣa*.

In connection with *prāyaścitta*, the story often recited was that of Arjunamali who, in order to avenge the honour of his wife, became a bandit and aroused such terror that nobody dared to cross the lonely part of the city. But nothing would prevent Sudarśana śreṣṭhin from crossing this terrorised part of the town to go and listen to the preachings of Mahāvīra (*deśanā*). His calm and courage impressed Arjunamali so much that he accompanied him to listen to Mahāvīra and took pravrajyā. People who in the past had suffered from his hands would torment him in every possible way, as he was harmless now. No amount of persecution could deter him from the path of *ahiṃsā*, *kṣamā* and *prāyaścitta* and, very soon, passing through the stages of *āsrava*, *nirjarā* and *saṃvara*, he attained perfect peace.

The story of Gajasukumāla illustrated the human capacity to endure suffering at the hands of others with perfect equanimity, pardoning everyone for « they did not know what they were doing ». In brief, when Gajasukumāla⁷, to whom the daughter of a rich and powerful śreṣṭhin was betrothed took pravrajyā, the śreṣṭhin was so infuriated that he made Gajasukumāla undergo extreme tortures (burning fire over his head); but he died without any ill-will against his tormentors and attained *mokṣa*.

On the theme of the inestimable value of *sāmāyika*, a story is narrated with saṃrāj Śreṇika as the principal figure. Śreṇika learnt from Mahāvīra that, because of the karmabandha-s he had bound to himself in his past lives, he could not avoid a sojourn in hell unless he persuaded Puniyā śrāvaka to sell him the merit which the latter had earned from his *sāmāyika*. He offered his entire kingdom to Puniyā śrāvaka, but the latter replied that *sāmāyika* was not a saleable or buyable commodity, and, just as no amount could save a man from dying, similarly, no amount of money could buy the merits of *sāmāyika*. Only one's own efforts, one's own *sāmāyika* could eliminate all karma-bandha-s and help to obtain *mokṣa*.

The virtues of *dāna*, and *āhāra-dāna* to a muni in particular, can hardly be exaggerated. The story of Candanabālā⁸ was very often quoted in this context. Satī Candanabālā, although born in a princely family, through vicissitudes of fortune was sold as a slave to a kindhearted śreṣṭhin who treated her like his own daughter. But, unfortunately his wife Mūlā, out of feminine jealousy put her in chains, put her behind seven doors under heavy lock and key, and went away. When after a few days the śreṣṭhin returned and learnt what had happened, he liberated her. As she was famished and there was nothing

7. Already in the *Śvetāmbara Siddhānta*: see *Antagaḍadasāo* III, 8 (BARNETT's translation, London, 1907, p. 71).

8. On which see NALINI BALBIR, *Dāna-stories*. *Supra*.

edible in the house except the black soja grains, he offered them to her in a winnowing basket. Her most cherished lifelong desire was of offering food to Mahāvīra after his fast (to « open » the *pāraṇā*). It so happened that Mahāvīra was doing his *cāturmāsa* in that city and on that very morning, he was to end his fast: he was going round to receive food from some śrāvaka or śrāvikā. But he had imposed certain conditions on himself for that day: he would accept food only from the hands of a young girl whose head was shaved, whose feet were still in fetters, who was standing on the doorsteps with grains of black soja in a winnowing basket. Everyone was eagerly waiting the divine privilege of offering food to Mahāvīra; but Mahāvīra, owing to the conditions he had preset in his mind, went away from every door; he stopped only when his eyes fell upon Candanabālā. He ended his fast by accepting food from her. There were rejoicings in the three worlds; Candanabālā renounced this world and attained the status of a satī.

Jainas are particularly active during Paryūṣaṇa days. Temples and sthānaka-s hum with all sorts of religious activities. The Jaina householders — men and women, old and young — try to live the life of a śramaṇa for these few days. These are the days of fasting (ranging from one day to eight, ten or eighteen days), days of offerings of charity on a large scale. The merits, even the worldly gains obtained are said to be immense. In this connection the story of the faithful Maināsundarī and Śrīpāla⁹ is tremendously popular; it is staged at regular intervals, and, recently, a film based on this story has been released. Maināsundarī is the daughter of Rāja Prajāpati of Ujjain, a highly pretentious man who thinks that his children's happiness is due to his bounty. One day, Maināsundarī being asked by her father if this is so, attributes the happy or miserable state of human existence to one's karman. The king is furious and, to teach his daughter a lesson, he marries her to the first leper whom he meets. Maināsundarī accepts it with great calm and accepts this leper Śrīpāla who had actually lost his fortune and also contracted this terrible disease due to his bad *karmodaya*. In the face of this ordeal, Maināsundarī performs *navapadī* or *siddheśvarī pūjā* to honour the nine padas namely, Arhat-s, Siddha-s, Ācārya-s, Upādhyāya-s, Sādhu-s, Jñāna, Darśana, Cāritra and Tapas. Thanks to her pious behaviour, she not only succeeds in curing her husband but she also saves him from many dangers and, ultimately, succeeds in regaining his kingdom.

Stories about the nature of human existence have been the favourite theme of popular paintings and wall frescoes inside the temples. The Agra Digambara temple had two big wall frescoes; the first depicted different species of animals, reptiles and birds engaged in

9. Cp. *id. supra*.

mutual slaughter; the second depicted the parable of *madhubindu*¹⁰ (drops of honey) in which a man was shown to be suspended on a branch of a tree and completely absorbed in licking the drops of honey falling from a beehive above his head. This branch is being eaten by two mice, one of them white (symbol of day), the other black (symbol of night). An elephant is shown trying to uproot the tree and a viper is awaiting patiently his fall into the well under the tree to bite him. It is the popular parable of an ignorant man who is so engrossed in worldly pleasures that he hardly perceives mortal dangers and even refuses to hear the *vidyādhara* who, from his *puṣpaka-vimāna* (celestial vehicle) beckons him and offers his help to save him.

It need not be said that besides *dharma-kathā*-s drawn from the Jaina narrative literature, many parables and inspiring stories from the great epics such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* and from many *Purāṇa*-s were freely utilised as illustrative of dharma. Stories based on avatāra-s of Viṣṇu and his interventions to save his devotees, and also the lives of great mystic saintly poets and religious leaders other than Jaina, provided material to illustrate *bhakti*. As a matter of fact, except for certain sectarian rituals, we were so integrated with the general religious Hindu practices and *saṃskāra*-s that it sometimes became hard to draw a dividing line between the Jaina living tradition and the ambivalent main current of the great Hindu civilisation. This synthetic and non-sectarian attitude has been finely incorporated in *Merī Bhāvanā* (Musings Mine) — a chef-d'œuvre of popular Jainism — which every Jaina howsoever illiterate may recite with each prayer:

« May my mind be full of devotion for and ever occupied with the thought of Him who has conquered attachment, aversion, sex and other passions, has known the Reality (of the cosmos) in its entirety, and preached to all the beings the path of Liberation, without any selfish motive, be he called by the name of Buddha, Vira, the Jina, Hari, Hara, Brahma or the Supreme Being »¹¹.

[Names of the main heroes quoted above: Ariṣṭanemi, Arjunamali, Bāhubali, Bharata, Brahmī, Candanabālā, Gajasukumāla, Kamatha, Kūra Gaduka, Mahāvīra, Mainasundarī, Meghakumāra, Megharatha, Mūlā, Pāśvanātha, Prasannacandra, Puniyā śrāvaka, Rṣabhadeva, Sanatkumāra, Śreṇika, Śrīpāla, Sudarśana-śreṣṭhin, Sundarī, Vijayā, Vijaya-śreṣṭhin]

10. As early as the Vasudevahiṇḍi (8, 3-23). See J. C. JAIN, *The Vasudevahiṇḍi*, An authentic Jain Version of the Bṛhatkathā (Ahmedabad, 1977), pp. 560-61 with references (L.D. Series 59).

11. English translation following JYOTI PRASAD JAIN, *Religion and Culture of the Jains*, Delhi, 1977², p. 182 (Bhāratiya Jñānapīṭha Mūrtidevi Jain Granthamālā, English Series 6).